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Postmodern Feminist Reading towards Gauri Character In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini memaparkan hasil analisis terhadap novel karya Jhumpa Lahiri yang berjudul *The Lowland* dengan menggunakan pendekatan feminisme pascamodern. Fokus penelitian ini adalah adanya perilaku yang tidak biasa yang dilakukan oleh Gauri sebagai tokoh utama perempuan dalam novel tersebut, yang sejak awal diasumsikan oleh pembaca sebagai sebuah ketidakwajaran. Penelitian ini memakai teori feminisme pascamodern yang disampaikan oleh beberapa teoris seperti Luce Irigaray dan Judith Butler yang mana teori ini menyimpulkan bahwa laki-laki tidak seharusnya menjadi tolak ukur untuk sebuah kebebasan dan kesetaraan serta tidak adanya keabsahan makna dalam suatu konteks. Penelitian ini menghasilkan dua kesimpulan. Pertama, perilaku yang tidak wajar yang dilakukan Gauri dalam novel bukanlah sesuatu yang harus dipermasalahkan dan ketidakwajaran tersebut bisa dipatahkan. Kedua, dari semua masalah yang berhubungan dengan perilaku Gauri dalam novel menghasilkan suatu pola berulang-ulang yang manamematahkan konsep dari kebebasan dan kesetaraan yang telah diumbar oleh feminisme gelombang kedua. Tidak adanya suatu batasan makna tetap untuk perempuan dalam mencapai hasratnya, baik dengan harus memasukkan diri mereka ke dalam masalah untuk bisa mencapai tujuannya.

Kata Kunci: *feminism postmodern, feminisme gelombang kedua, phallogosentrisme, kebebasan dan kesetaraan*

Abstract: This study presents the results of an analysis of a novel by Jhumpa Lahiri entitled *The Lowland* using a postmodern feminism approach. The focus of this research is the existence of unusual behavior carried out by Gauri as the main female character in the novel, which from the beginning was assumed by the reader as an irregularity. This research uses the theory of postmodern feminism conveyed by several theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler which this theory concludes that men should not be a benchmark for freedom and equality and the absence of validity of meaning in a context. This research produces two conclusions. First, Gauri's improper behavior in the novel is not something to be questioned and the irregularity can be broken. Second, all the problems related to Gauri's behavior in the novel produce a repetitive pattern which breaks the concepts of freedom and equality that have been offered by the second wave of feminism. The absence of a fixed meaning limit for women in achieving their desires, either by having to put themselves in trouble to be able to achieve their goals.

Keywords: *postmodern feminism, second wave feminism, phallogosentrism, freedom and equality.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri was born on July 11, 1967 in London, England by the name

of Nilanjani Sudhesna Lahiri. She grew up as a mixture of several cultures. Her parents, which are Indian descendant immigrated to England first, then

moved to the United States when she was two years old. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father worked as a librarian. As a writer, Lahiri is acknowledged as a prolific writer. Lahiri's first book, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is a short story collection that won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 and several awards. Jhumpa's next novel, *The Namesake* (2003) was filmed and being a popular film. Her last two pieces of writing; short stories collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) praised as *The New York Times* Best-Seller list and her novel *The Lowland* (2013) was nominated for Man Booker Prize and National Book Award for Fiction.

Unlike to the previous of Lahiri's piece of works, her latest novel, *The Lowland* offers unconventional style and theme. She dropped her prudent prose as well and changed it to be more direct and careless. *The Lowland* talks about a complicated drama between two brothers named Subhash and Udayan. They come from village outskirts of Calcutta named Tollygunge. Their complicated life is the center of the problem of the story.

In the narration of *The Lowland*, Lahiri creates a clear contrast between Udayan and Subhash characters. In general, Udayan is stubborn, adventurous, brave, and likes to try something new. In the other side, Subhash is a shy, common and future-oriented person. When they grow up, Subhash preferred to take study abroad

to America, meanwhile, Udayan stayed in India to continue his study.

During his study time, Udayan decided to marry a woman named Gauri. She was a smart student based on Udayan's point of view. One day, Udayan is caught up because of his political action. He joined a radical activist movement and eventually killed by the police in front of his parents and Gauri. This accident brings out a big shock for Udayan's family. It creates a prolonged suffering, especially for the woman, Gauri and Udayan's mother. After hearing this tragedy, Subhash, the elder fifteen months brother, returned to mourn the younger brother's death. After the death of Udayan, the family treats Gauri like a stranger. She is forced to wear the white sari –Indian traditional uniform for the woman, and she is not allowed to eat meat for several days. What is more, the family is forbidden to talk with her. Gauri took all burden and being blamed as the ultimate cause of Udayan's death. Furthermore, the problem gets bigger when Subhash decides to marry and brings Gauri to the United States because he thinks it will save her from the family's rage and disappointment.

In their new life in the United States, Subhash and Gauri is not like a normal spouse. Gauri takes a long time to adapt a role as a wife. Gauri also hardly treats Subhash as her husband. After giving a birth to his baby named Bella, Gauri's attitudes become even stranger. She did not act like the normal

mother to young Bella. After all, Gauri is no longer taking care for Bella. When Bella grew up and studied in art school, Gauri sets to leave Subhash and Bella. One day, Bella found the truth that Subhash was not her real father. She was angry to Gauri because she never tells the reality. At the end of the novel, Gauri abandons her family at all. She decides to live alone without Subhash and Bella in the rest of her life.

In the most of Lahiri's works, she usually discusses immigrant experiences, the assimilation of conflict in cultures, family life disagreement, and the tangled tie between generations. As a woman who grows up in the outside India, she has a real difficulty with the mixture of Indian-American culture. She tries to describe Indian culture based on her limited knowledge of it.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri offers her different perspective towards Indian culture, especially through Gauri character. In this novel, Lahiri also portrays the problem within Indian-American figure in accepting Indian traditional culture. In this case, Lahiri focuses on the struggle of Gauri toward cultural repression and how she makes a deal with this problem.

In this novel, Lahiri tries to raise something new in her writing. She moves away from her characterization pattern like intellectual husband and traditional wife. She offers a new character with fresh ideas through Gauri characterization. Behind Gauri's conflicts with the family, her husband,

and Bella, Lahiri challenge her reader about the value of marriage and parenting. Different from previous analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's works, the writer comes up with a new focus. In this research, the writer wants to discuss Gauri's actions and ideas through the postmodern feminist point of view.

The writer is interested in exploring the way of Lahiri portrays Gauri as the antagonist female character in the story. The writer proposes to apply postmodern feminist criticism to generate and elaborate the main analysis of this research. The focus of this research is the life journey of Gauri that considered as unconventional portrayal of female choice in a novel. Finally, the writer sees a brand new feminist idea in Gauri's characterization and expects to give an insight about it.

2. REVIEW

In order to enrich the knowledge and the analysis especially relate to female character Gauri, the writer provides several previous studies towards *The Lowland* and then compares those reviews with this research to see the differences. The previous researches are written by scholars with different focuses.

First one is a thesis by Andalas University student, Shintia Ariska (2016) with title "Diasporic Journey in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*: A Freudian Psychoanalysis." In her analysis, she focused on the woman

main character, Gauri. She considered Gauri as the character who has a mentality problem. Shintia highlights three kinds of the problems; first, she believes that Gauri experiences *Schizoid Personality Disorder*. It means that Gauri is a kind of introvert girl with interaction problems. Next, Shintia assumed that Gauri gets traumatic experiences on family loss and beloved person. The last one, Shintia concludes that Gauri took a diasporic journey to solve her mentality problem. Shintia sees that journey operates as her ego defending to disentangled her problem and make a way to be a woman with a new identity.

The next paper is a Shruti Das' writing entitled "Lifestyle Migration and A Burst Utopia in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*" (2015). This article argues that Gauri's forgetting and indifference appear from a series of protests built around her traumatic experiences in her homeland, India. The series of protests are planted in Gauri's refusing to talk about her past, her detachment with her husband Subhas and her daughter, Bela, her complete focus in an intellectual life and also her self-motivated second exile from Rhode Island to California in order to become free and independent. From Das analysis, Gauri's controversial actions and choices that pursuit of a good life socially, economically and politically is an undeniable drive for people that migrate into other countries.

The last review is Raj Gaurav Verma's essay entitled "Wives and Widows in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri: A Comparative Study of *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*" (2015). In his writing, Verma argues several points that relate the main female characters between both novels, Ashima and Gauri. In their marriage life, Ashima and Gauri are in solitude. Also, in the case of Gauri and Ashima, the "mourning" remains common. On one hand, Ashima is unable to consider America as her home, on the other hand, Gauri, who remarries Subhash is unable to set-up home with him. For Ashima the impact is direct, that is, the reader can witness the severing of the link between the individual and the homeland; while, for Gauri, it is indirect but more intense, and the memories of a home visit her through the memories, images and moments she spent with Udayan. The trap of trauma and hesitate also haunt Ashima and Gauri's life. Ashima's life moves to and from in past and present. Sometimes, she is nostalgic gathering images of her family in India, at other times she is found struggling hard with her present life in a foreign land. But, for Gauri, the mourning never ends and it turns into "melancholia". This melancholia results in the "specter" of Udayan, so that wherever she goes, wherever she stays, she is never able to escape its influence.

The selected reviews above give a highlight about Gauri's character. She is not like Lahiri's previous female

character that is submissive, weak and becoming a victim of her situation. In Shintia's paper, Gauri made her way become a new person by conducting a diasporic journey on her own. In Das' article, he justified Gauri's choice and action as a common drive of a migrant. Gauri's effort is viewed as the quest for self and identity in the new land. In the last essay, Verma offers a totally different character in Gauri as compare to another female character in The Namesake novel, Ashima.

3. METHOD

In conducting the research, the writer followed three steps. They were collecting data, analyzing data and presenting the result of the analysis. In collecting the data of this research, the writer used the library research method. It lead to two kinds of data, primary and secondary data. The primary data were from the first novel by Jhumpa Lahiri entitled *The Lowland* related to the issue of rejection of traditional woman roles. The secondary data were collected from several sources such as articles, book, and journal related to the topic and theory used by the writer.

The writer used qualitative in nature to analyze this novel. The writer has done it by reading the primary data deeply and finding the issue that relates to feminism reading. Then, to answer the problem of the research, the writer related the issue found in the novel with the Feminist theoretical framework, especially in Gauri's character. The

analysis described the moment and description in the novel through the Postmodern feminist point of view. The writer applied the descriptive method to present the result of the analysis. The discussion explained the issue of rejection of traditional woman roles using primary and secondary data. The writer provided some views and perspectives from other researchers and supported this research by adding some quotation from the selected data.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

To confirm how postmodern feminism sees Gauri character, how postmodern-feminism influenced Gauri character, and what makes Gauri character as the representation of postmodern feminism, the writer explain each point from what the general feminism see it as the problem that Gauri does in the novel and how postmodern-feminism see it. Firstly, the writer explain the unconventional actions that Gauri portrays in the novel, secondly, the writer explain how those all portrayal that found in Gauri sees from the postmodern-feminism point of view and the relationship between them.

The Unconventional Portrayal of Gauri character in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland

By referring to Lahiri's description and picture about Gauri's unconventional attitude and actions in the novel, the writer assume that Gauri represents

someone who has her own way to express herself. Her attitude and action which probably seen as something as wrong and would be blamed by most people, while every woman dreamed of being a good wife, she rather put herself as a woman who enjoy her own life than be a normal in mostly woman point of view which is good and take care of her husband even it is in her second marriage. She has a very different perception of life compared to most women, especially Indian women. In a case of the death of Udayan turns her to be someone who pursues her own life in a different way.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1995), the term "unconventional" means something which not following what is considered as normal practice or behavior. Sometimes, some unconventional behavior can be accepted and some of them can be not. In this case, unconventional that Gauri portray are may not accepted by social especially in traditional feminism theory because it related to everything about woman behavior which has been constructed by society for long time, such as how woman supposed to be in marriage, what it is parenting or what it is mean to be a mother, and how woman in native culture.

There is some unconventional behavior that Gauri portray and discovered in *The Lowland* depends on the plot of the novel. **The first** portrayal is when Gauri decided to marry a man named Udayan, Subhash

brother. She knows that Udayan is a controversial guy, he joined Naxalbari movement which considered as prohibit movement and forbidden in India. Usually, a woman is looking and marry a man who can protect her, a man who can make her feel safe and will not put her in danger, but not with Gauri, she marry Udayan just because both of them have the same way of thinking, the like same thing. It is implied in Udayan's letter to Subhash when he introduces Gauri for the first time to Subhash "She prefers books to jewels and saris, she believes as I do" (Lahiri, 56).

Second, every culture has its own rule to the woman, what they should do and what they should not do. When Udayan dies, as an Indian widow she has to follow the rule that she cannot wash her clothes, she cannot wear slippers or even comb her hair, and also she has to wear the white sari to show that she is a widow. In one moment, few days after Subhash brings Gauri to Rhode Island, he found some things and stuffs in her room, he also realized that Gauri cut her hair off, Gauri did not wear sari anymore "In one corner of the room all her Saris, petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scraps of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws." (Lahiri 68).

Third, When Gauri already married to Subhash, she did not act like a wife supposed to be, she did not treat Subhash like her husband, she just enjoys her own life, she rather going

around campus than stay at home and think about her pregnancy. For some women, married is means to be loyal to their husband, treat them good. According to article titled *Hindu Marriages Purpose and Significance* by Jayaram (2015) said "As the epic Ramayana and the Mahabharata illustrate, a couple ought to stick together through the ups and downs of life, however challenging and arduous the situation may be, taking care of each other and keeping faith in each other." (Jayavram, 1). Gauri and Subhash even did not sleep in the same room for a long time, even this was Subhash idea but for some people, this is not what is marriage supposed to be. As mentioned in the novel "Subhash and Gauri shared a bed at night, they had a child in common. Almost five years ago they had begun their journey as husband and wife, but he was still waiting to arrive somewhere with her." (Lahiri, 190).

When we talk about marriage, we cannot go far from the sexual relationship. The relationship between marriage and sex is marriage is the media for marriage people to continue their generation, and sex is one of the important things in marriage. Gauri needs quite long time even for touch Subhash "She told him it had been reassuring, having him with her in the room. She said that she was ready, that it had been long enough." (Lahiri, 176). This moment the writer considered as another reason that might be seen as

the unconventional portray by the reader.

Fourth, in order of parenthood, Gauri also does not treat Bela well. At the first time, she acts like a normal mother to Bela; she takes care of her. But, after several times, she began to realize all of her feeling and her attention to Bela are just a role. Gauri did not really feel what is being a mother to her; then she starts to ignore Bela, and she began more ignorant after she got the chance to continue her doctoral program. This unconventional parenthood, of course, should be receiving many disagreements. This act takes Gauri against Indian culture again that according to Hinduism "The Vedas suggest that a woman's primary duty is to help her husband in performing obligatory duties and enable him to continue his family tradition. Her primary duty is to give birth to his children and take care of them." (Jayavram, 2).

Lastly, Gauri's undeniable desire for emotional redemption is too excessive until she she gives in to a short-term lesbian relationship. After she fails to establish a relationship with men, not a single man can satisfy her needs, especially in an effort to forget and remove Udayan which is very haunting memories.

This unusual relationship is part of Gauri's long effort to fight her past. Gauri's struggle in realizing her choices came again as Gauri struggled to keep her from falling into the solitude. After Lorna's departure, any

regrets about several decisions continued to haunt her. This prolonged dilemma is a personal conflict between Gauri and the will of fate.

Postmodern Feminism Reading through Gauri Character in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland

In 2013 Jhumpa Lahiri writes her second novel called *The Lowland*, which is this novel believes as the novel that explores and presents another idea of female independences. Based on the previous analysis, all of her unconventional behaviors in the novel are something that turns her into new autonomous female character. However, those uncommon acts that pointed to Gauri can be resisted if we see from postmodern feminism point of view that shows a woman can have the freedom in anyways.

The writer argue some unconventional portrayals that Gauri depicts in *The Lowland*, the unconventional behavior may see as something unusual through readers are actually showing how the way she is thinking about the life and show how independent she is. Gauri also portrays how a woman can achieve freedom and happiness in a different way. In my opinion, all of those thoughts that may come from the reader mind can be denied. To show the resistances, the writer explains how Gauri character from postmodern feminism point of view. This explanation comes from the fact that postmodern feminism has a

different way of thinking than the common feminist. The analysis starts from Gauri becomes Udayan's wife to the moment when she marries Subhash until the end when she decided to live alone. Instead of taking of unconventional behavior as something that may reject by the reader, Gauri takes it as the way of her to show herself as the autonomous woman and takes it as a pleasurable occasion; she seems like loving her activity that brings her into a different person that enjoys living her life.

Tong said in her book entitled *Feminist Thought* (2008) says: "Like all postmodernists, postmodern feminists reject phallogocentric thought, that is, ideas ordered around an absolute word (logos) that is "male" in style (hence the reference to the phallus)" (Tong,283). This "male" in style is a concept that offered by second wave feminism. Sarah Gamble (2004) in her book mentioned that for them the relation between new feminism and old feminism is to combine the movement of liberation for the woman as known as *woman's liberation* and equality or as first wave feminism called as *equal rights*. Woman's liberation and equal rights among the woman it means that they have to be as the same as the man, which is means that they still put "phallus" or male as the concern of their movement. This is what postmodern feminism back-lashing to the second wave feminism, their thought that this concern is useless for

nowadays. They think that man and woman should not be equal; they have to differ by appreciating each other rights.

In Gauri's case, the writer found that she is not trying to be a woman that has to be equal to man, she seems to like a move away from that concept. For marrying Udayan, they decide to marry because they have the same way of thinking, they like reading the books, they both like Plato, and another similarity.

Gauri attracted to Udayan because of his knowledge and how the way he treats her. He is different when she felt she was invisible among the other men, she thinks Udayan see her differently. It makes clearer after they knew each other.

The writer assumes that how the way Gauri chose Udayan to be her husband is show her way to pursue her freedom. Normally a woman chooses a man in conventional marriage is depends on something from them, mostly they choose the man who can effort them goods and comfort, besides of their emotional feeling. It also happens to second-wave feminism woman. According to Rachel F. Moran in her article entitled *How Second Wave Feminism Forgot the Single Woman* (2004), said:

Depends on this statement, the writer argues that liberal woman seems like wanted to have it all, they are looking for the opportunity to chase their career by having a good man with good goods and well established.

Gauri in her case is not showing anything that relates to those standardizations. When she decides to marry Udayan, this action reflects postmodern feminist thought herself. Here Gauri is in a different perspective with the second-wave feminist thought that some of them rejected the marriage because they believed it considered as a patriarchal agent.

The above analysis shows the proofs that Gauri represents or portrays the independent woman who has her own way to get her freedom. All of the unconventional behavior that Gauri did in the novel presents her as the autonomous or independent woman that has her own way in accomplishing her freedom that will always change in a different way depends on her need and what will make her feel more comfortable.

5. CONCLUSIONS

After reading and analyzing *The Lowlandas* as a literary work and original manifestation of human thought, the writer concludes that this novel is not just a story about the two Indian brothers, Udayan and Subhash. Furthermore, this novel actually focus on Gauri's quest, the antagonist one. In this novel, Gauri's pursuit to the happiness is complicated and dilemmatic journey. The analysis of the novel through postmodern feminist point of view toward Gauri's odyssey then brings two major conclusions.

First conclusion points out that a series of strange and controversial

behavior of Gauri is a form of creativity of Lahiri's character creation. From a postmodern-feminist stand point, Lahiri has succeeded in creating a distinctive subject in the attempt to reject the gender-opposition binary that the patriarchy has been offering over the years. Gauri's actions have a long history of thought and always refer to her full commitment to her own happiness as a free subject.

Second, Gauri's unconventional act is a manifestation of postmodern thought in their attempt on achieving the happiness. This pattern is also different from the concept of achieving the freedom offered by the second wave of feminism through total rejection toward male.

Postmodernism Feminist has different notion in rejecting male-centre thinking. Furthermore, this path encourages female characters to not measure themselves to the size of men again. In this way, women will be free from patriarchal influence through the creation of totally free and distinctive female characters. This is what Gauri exemplifies from the beginning of the story. Her struggle to achieve full freedom is a never-ending process of trial and error without the existence of patriarchy.

The writer personally expects that this research could contribute to the enrichment of literary studies. Then, I also hope that this research can be used as the references for upcoming research in the field of postmodern-feminism. Finally, the writer expects

that in the future there will be a further discussion on this topic.

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